

# Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission Approves Rulemaking Petition to Protect Cougars and Bears

*Decision Opens Rulemaking Process to Make Changes in Advance of 2024 Hunting Season*

OLYMPIA, WA, UNITED STATES,  
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EINPresswire.com/ -- [Washington Wildlife First](#) applauds the Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission for voting 7-2 on Friday to approve our [rulemaking petition](#) to end the overexploitation of the state's cougar and bear populations.

"With this vote, the Commission has demonstrated its commitment to managing wildlife populations based on science, rather than in response to special interest demands," says Claire Loeb Davis, board president and acting director of Washington Wildlife First. "We hope that it signals the beginning of the end of the state's senseless war on carnivores, and a recognition that healthy cougar and bear populations are essential to healthy ecosystems."

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife expanded bear and cougar hunting in 2019 and 2020 in response to demands from a small group of hunters, ignoring groundbreaking science produced by its own biologists after decades of research. Last year, Washington hunters and enforcement officers killed 289 cougars, making it the seventh year in a row that cougar mortality exceeded sustainable levels. During the same time period, Washington hunters killed an all-time high of 2,211 bears, roughly 50% more than just four years ago.

In October, seven other wildlife advocacy groups joined Washington Wildlife First in filing a rulemaking petition asking the Commission to change current regulations to end the overhunting of bears and cougars. In addition to requesting a rollback of the 2019 and 2020 rule



Washington Wildlife First aims to transform state wildlife management to emphasize conservation over consumption.

changes, the petition asks the Commission to count all human-caused mortality toward hunting limits and to take steps to ensure the Department can enforce those limits.

During a presentation on Friday in opposition to the petition, Game Division Manager Anis Aoude said he agreed with most of its assertions, which were supported by hundreds of footnotes citing scientific evidence.

“Much of what you heard is probably valid in its own context, and I want to make sure that you know that I understand that,” Aoude said. “I also want folks to know that I don’t disagree with much of what we heard in the petition or from the scientists who signed on to this petition. In fact, many of the references in the petition were written by our staff, and reviewed by me, so for me to disagree [would not be] appropriate.”



A treed cougar peers through the branches. Photo by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife,

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We hope the Commission maintains the courage it demonstrated with this vote and will continue to carefully evaluate the facts and the science to make the right decisions for Washington’s wildlife.”

*Claire Loeb Davis*

A few days prior to the vote, a group of 50 of the nation’s top carnivore experts [submitted a letter](#) to the Commission confirming the accuracy of many of the key scientific points raised by the petition, and warning that excessive mortality could cause a significant drop in cougar and bear populations before managers are able to detect a decline.

“Issues related to large carnivores often inspire an emotional and passionate response from the public, creating a difficult political situation for policymakers,” the

letter concluded. “We urge policymakers to navigate this situation with the best-available science as their north star, and to take the lead in educating their communities about the science and the impact of cougar and bear management decisions.”

Following a lengthy discussion and debate on Friday, Commission Chair Barbara Baker and Commissioners John Lehmkuhl, Woody Myers, Steve Parker, Tim Ragen, Melanie Rowland and Lorna Smith voted to approve the petition, with Vice-Chair Molly Linville and Commissioner Jim Anderson dissenting.

The vote opens rulemaking on bear and cougar hunting, providing the Commission with an opportunity to make changes before the 2024 hunting season. The Commission will need to navigate this process in the face of virulent opposition from national hunting groups such as the U.S. Sportsman's Alliance. Several bear and cougar hunters responded to the vote during Saturday's Commission meeting, calling commissioners "evil" and dishonest, and accusing them of trying to end hunting in the state. The Commission faced similar retaliation after it voted in 2022 to end recreational spring bear hunting, including personal attacks and threats that caused some commissioners to fear for their safety.



A female black bear keeps watch over her young cubs. Photo by Barry Reiss.

"Powerful national groups have turned their sights on Washington and are attempting to thwart the move toward science-based management by manufacturing a culture war based on the absurd and baseless claim that the Commission is trying to end hunting," Davis said. "We hope the Commission maintains the courage it demonstrated with this vote and will continue to carefully evaluate the facts and the science to make the right decisions for Washington's wildlife."

Washington Wildlife First was joined in the petition by the Mountain Lion Foundation, The Humane Society of the United States, the Center for Biological Diversity, Coexisting with Cougars in Klickitat County, WildFutures, Predator Defense, and the Kettle Range Conservation Group.

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